Sir Thopas

Imagining the World in Maps and Stories: *Sir Thopas*

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Introduction

Texts, just like travelers, sometimes lose their way. We have all had the experience of reading something—be it a classmate's essay, an essay in a companion piece, a novel, or something else—and we are not quite sure where things are going. This might be that the author has introduced an idea that distracts from the main point, or it might simply be that we as readers do not understand the connections between ideas. Either way, as readers, we look for the text to get back on track.

As Chaucer begins to recount his *Tale of Sir Thopas*, the characters have just heard the *Prioress's Tale*, detailing the grisly murder of a young boy. As you know from the previous essay, it is a hagiographic tale of a miracle made possible through the intervention of the Virgin Mary. Though it fits within a tradition of miracle literature, it seems out of place with much of what we have heard in the *Canterbury Tales* and our group of pilgrims, "every man / As sobre was that wonder was to se" (Th 691-92). In other words, the Prioress's story has sobered up everyone—the narrator tells us that it is a kind of miracle itself—and everyone is now silent. So what should happen next? The *Prioress's Tale* has effectively stopped the storytelling because the pilgrims are not sure what to say next. How do you follow that story?

The Host indicates it is Chaucer's task to "Telle us a tale of myrthe" (706). The Host's instructions for a return to our way is for a tale of mirth that can relocate them from their serious contemplation. That tale of mirth, however, is abbreviated, as our Host once again stops the direction of storytelling—stopping, in effect, the journey—because he judges the tale as inappropriate for the task of returning the pilgrims to their former state. To help us think about *Sir Thopas*'s abbreviated journey, we might consider *Sir Thopas* in the context of medieval maps.

Tools

The most common form of medieval maps are *mappae mundi,* literally "maps of the world," which are organized in a T-O fashion. There were also navigational maps in use from the thirteenth to sixteenth centuries, but those maps were generally confined to professional

applications (Casey 175). These T-O maps, generally, have three land masses (Asia, Europe, and Africa) separated by two lines of waterways: "on the emblematic T-O maps, it was the definitive vertical stroke that separated Europe from Africa and above which Jerusalem differently occupied a privileged orbocentric position" (194). In other words, the center of the world, the center of the map—the place our eyes are most often drawn to—is Jerusalem, which orients the world to the Christian worldview, as "the spiritual center . . . [which seems] a natural outcome of the Crusades" (Woodward 517). Not only was Jerusalem the center of the map, a *mappa mundi* was oriented with east at the top of the circle, where the Garden of Eden was thought to still exist.

Generally, the *mappae mundi* cannot be considered as practical or as accurate representations of land masses or distances. There is a condensing of the world into a manageable unit, and so this condensation is a conscious process of selection, omission, and revision. Through this process of crafting, the maps feature a number of different traditions and discourses joining into one form and, in the example of the Hereford map, connecting "the timeless realm of the Last Judgement to the worldly realm of geography, natural history, events, and peoples" (Kline 3), with the primary function to provide a "visual narrative of Christian history cast in a geographical framework" (Woodward 519). In other words, the map has to be viewed as reinforcing the doctrinal and theological implications of a world imbued and formed by God.[1]

Of course, this circular form—the O of the T-O map—demonstrates a boundary of the world. This circumscribing of the known world—no Americas, no Antarctica yet—into the circular form of the map forces us to see that all items of knowledge (hence, the known world) are contained within the circular vision of the map. Circles, though, are not simply ways of thinking about the Earth. Rather, circles have a connection with completeness, and circles were often found in books as a learning device, encapsulating different theories and definitions. In other words, the circles or *rotae* contained knowledge and focused the reader's attention on that specific information and how those pieces of information worked together. This binding together of information made material more understandable and forced an audience to see connections.

Though images and concepts might be placed within a circular form, will the connections be comprehensible for the audience? There has long been the understanding that visual images in the Middle Ages were designed and implemented for the benefit of the unlearned. This has been most closely associated with St. Gregory the Great, pope from 590-604, who held that "For it is one thing to venerate a picture and another to learn the story it depicts, which is to be venerated. The picture is for simple men . . . what writing is for those who can read, for those who cannot read see and learn from the picture the model which they should follow. Thus pictures are, above all, for the instruction of the people" (Camille 26). This idea has been central to how we often view visual imagery from the Middle Ages—and it seems to make sense. How can those without the skills of literacy understand the complex doctrine and narratives of Christianity? Through visual images, like the stained-glass windows of a typical medieval church, individuals might have an opportunity to know and understand deep truths.

But there is a problem with this idea of "instruction of the people," and it is this: how would someone who cannot read or lacks the basic knowledge of the subject matter be able to understand a visual image?[2] Just like a stained-glass window, a medieval map features images,

symbols, and written text that would not be easily understood when one did not have the learning or knowledge to decipher the map. How would we know that east is up? How would we know which land masses are which? Such an interpretative task would be difficult for a first time viewer, made all the more difficult due to a lack of literacy. Maps, then, might be understood as designed for a disparate audience, which is articulated in the inscription in the Hereford map: "All who have this history / Or shall hear or read or see it" (Kline 52). These images, then, might be consumed in a variety of means; therefore, we might well imagine that a person might need a guide to understand the intersections of text and images of a medieval map. A typical medieval viewer, then, was "the person who must have relied on the literacy of another for access to pictorial art . . . [this typical viewer] would have perceived these words of art, not in terms of individual response, but as a choric or mass one" (Camille 32).

This notion of a shared experience, one guided by a figure with greater visual and cultural literacy, resonates with a new reader's experience of *Sir Thopas*. We see a text, which is clearly unfinished, which is referencing a form of literature with which many might have less familiarity, and so we need a guide to understand the world map of *Sir Thopas*. But who is the guide? Here, I think, we would do well to split Chaucer into two beings—Chaucer the Poet and Chaucer the Pilgrim. As E.T. Donaldson reminds us, we can become so enamored with the story that we forget that it is not real life, that it is still a poetic creation; in fact, he calls this one of the "casualties" of reading the poem as real life (928-36). We need, then, to see Chaucer the Pilgrim as, on one level, telling us the tale, but his words, his interactions with the audience, and his representation, are being controlled by Chaucer the Poet. So, though Chaucer the Pilgrim is telling us this tale, he is not the one controlling the narrative—Chaucer the Poet is our guide, our translator, and we must attend to what, whom, and where he directs our attention in the text.

We also need to be aware of this tale as a map, though we cannot think of it as giving us specific directions to find fairy land. Rather, the *Tale of Sir Thopas* allows us to see how we attempt to center our attentions on items that the Host and other pilgrims might not consider valuable or worthy of their attention. In fact, if they are looking for a tale to get the storytelling competition back on track, they have found the wrong individual (and the wrong map) for the task.

Text

The first place to where Chaucer the Poet brings our attention is Chaucer the Pilgrim's standing or status in the company, as the Host cries out, "Now war yow, sires, and lat this man have place!" (Th 699). He draws attention to his "place," and we must see where and from whom this text begins—the poet has the Host describe him as being well-shaped in the waist, a kind of small doll ready to be embraced, with an elvish countenance. Chaucer, as described by the Host, is not an imposing figure, but someone who might be easily overlooked and who seems nervous in the company, a figure existing nearly on the outside of the group. Not only is this a figure who does not seem to fit in with the boisterous elements of the company, or even the holier elements of the company, but his tale is not a new one—it is an old tale "of a rym I learned longe agoon" (709). Therefore, Chaucer presents a description of himself as someone existing on the outside of the group and on the outside of contemporary literature—his tale is old, something from his childhood. He is situating himself (locating himself, in fact) as not being in the center of the

group or of the fashionable techniques of poetry. If we are trying to find someone who can capture the pilgrims' attention, Harry's choice seems an odd one.

The kind of poem he tells is a romance, which might be generally defined as a popular form of poetry designed for a "relatively broad and varied [audience]: old and young, women and men, clerical and lay, nobility, gentry, merchants and those who could not afford—perhaps could not read—their own manuscript or print copy of a Middle English romance" (Purdie and Cichon 1). These are poems, though, that depended upon a kind of universal language and appeal and do not require "the reader (or listener) to dwell on words or images or narrative singularities" (Pearsall).[3] In other words, these are stories more about action and adventure, the conquering of the hero over seemingly impossible odds. But if we take Chaucer's earlier description of himself and his tale, this is not a new tale, and by extension, there is a question as to whether or not it will be well-received when told by someone on the outside of the company.

So we begin our tale on the outside, looking backwards into time, and then add three more places to our map: "Poperyng. . . in Flaunders,"[4] "the contree of Fairye," and "towne." These are places that are not offered any description, so the map we might create (however geographically accurate or not) will have place names and no real geographical markers of note. During his journey from Poperyng, he "priketh thurgh a fair forest" (Th 754) filled with many wild, though lacking names and descriptions, beasts and then "priketh north and est" (757) where he sees flowers and herbs that might freshen our knight's beer and clothes. This forest setting, however, does not refresh our knight, causing him to be filled with "love-longynge" and "pryked as he were wood" (772; 774), leaving him wearied by his "pryking." All of this priketh-ing is designed for him to get to that "contree of Fairye," which "he so longe hath and riden and goon / That he foond, in a pryve woon . . . So wilde" (800-3). If we look at a reliable map, this journeying to the north and east would put him near Bruges (some 36 miles), but he ends up not near Bruges but in this Fairy Land. Again, it is not surprising that the tale does not give us an accurate series of directions—it is a medieval map. It wants to bring us to Fairy Land, a place where we can all enjoy the scenery, a place where we can all enjoy the journey, a place where we can all enjoy the tale—taking Pearsall's idea above, then a romance might be perfect. So why does Chaucer's romance not work?

One reason is that our map is partly oriented by its departure place of a Flemish town, a place that the audience would not think of as exotic (this is not a knight journeying from Jerusalem, fighting for his faith) but corresponds to the mercantile world of cloth making and the like, to a place that should be filled with wonders and adventures.[5] As David Wallace accurately appraises the location, the use of Flaundres "sounds a retreat from an epic register . . . [which] befits Sir Thopas, a middling kind of knight and a distinctively Flemish one" (Wallace 99). To emphasize the supposed-wondrous quality of the place and the fierceness of Sir Thopas, Chaucer the Pilgrim tells us that "was ther noon / That to him durste ride or goon, / Neither wyf ne childe" (Th 804-6). This is place, we are told, where Sir Thopas' bravery and prowess is recognized, because no one dared to ride out to him to challenge his being there, not even a wife or a child. We are looking for the mirth at the center of this tale, yet we are constantly reminded that mirth might not be so forthcoming.

Eventually, though, our brave knight is challenged by "a greet geaunt. / His name was sire Olifaunt, / A perilous man of dede" (807-9). This Fairy Land presents, then, Sir Thopas with a challenge—a direct threat to his desired goal of finding *an* "elf-queene." Here is the first opportunity to mark the map with a direct item of interest—we might draw the giant as resembling an elephant, or simply make him very large. Here is not only a place of interest but a place where the romance should indicate action and engagement. Instead of making the center of our map Jerusalem, orienting our actions around a Christian cosmology and a landscape endowed with Christian morality, our map is centered on the "contree of Fairye." Everything, we might imagine, depends upon this place, as Sir Thopas has made finding this place his sole focus—it provides the structure for his worldview and all of his actions. Here is the place that will bring the audience that much needed mirth.

Yet we arrive at this focal point, the place which defines all of our action, and Sir Thopas refuses to engage Sire Olifaunt. In fact, Chaucer the Pilgrim describes it as Thopas "drow abak ful faste" (827) to avoid Olifaunt's throwing of stones, allowing for the "faire escapeth [of] child Thopas" (830). We spend but thirty lines in this central location, and as we await for the moment of bravery and chivalric exploit, we quickly—all of three lines—"Prikyng over hill and dale, / [Sir Thopas] Is comen agayn to towne" (837-38). The poem has, in effect, circled around, circumscribing the landscape of the poem and encircling the actions of Sir Thopas. The world of the poem is encapsulated in these lines, and the audience has been waiting for adventure, waiting for excitement—but Sir Thopas "priketh" away from everything, leaving the pilgrims' desire for mirth thwarted.

When we look at the natural world, we do not often consider it to be a created or organized environment. We think of the world as simply existing, but the world of the poem is not simply one that exists—it is a world that has been created by Chaucer. Here, then, is a world that has been crafted, just like the medieval artist would have crafted a world map, for us to see the ways in which individuals move through the world and their expectations. Humans do not move through the world without altering the environment—however natural or created the environment is. We linger at scenic vistas, which causes us to create national parks to protect those environments. We build high rises closer to the ocean to get the best view, which causes the need for levies and storm protection. In other words, the world of the poem, the world as depicted in artistic representation, and the world itself must be considered as a site of imposition. Humans impose value on places—emotional, aesthetic, moral. What are the values that Chaucer imposes on the world of *Sir Thopas*? What are the values he wants us to examine? As Robert Rouse accurately sums up this notion: "romance constructs an image of the world that emphasises the narrative and ideological discourse of the text. In doing so, romances engage in a process of 'writing the world'" (136).

Chaucer has been invited to resume the order of the pilgrims' world, and in the process, he creates a world of no action and no mirth. Chaucer the Poet wants us to see what happens when an author fails to meet the needs of an audience, producing a work that does not meet popular demands. There should be an easy map to follow for Chaucer the Poet and the Pilgrim to follow; however, he chooses not to do so.

Transformation

1. Above, I note that Chaucer demonstrates what happens when an author fails to please the audience. Why would Chaucer purposefully tell a poor tale? Is this a satire of writers, or is it a satire of an audience?
2. Chaucer's text is interrupted, because, according to the Host, it is filled with "lewedness . . . drasty speche . . . [and a] rym dogerel" (Th 921-25). What in the text would correspond to any of those choices? Is it more lewd than other tales? Filled with more "drasty speche" or "rym dogerel" than other tales?
3. Chaucer pivots, once again at the request of the Host, to the *Tale of Melibee*, which is not a rhyme and not a romance. Why would the pilgrims respond more positively to a long-winded prose tale of revenge?
4. The *Tale of Sir Thopas* features a knight who is explicitly referred to as a child. What does child mean in this time period? What evidence from the text indicates that Sir Thopas is not a "gem" of a knight? How does he act versus those knights we have seen in the text?
5. Because audience seems so important in this tale, are there other tales in the *Canterbury Tales* where we see the audience's reactions helping or hurting to shape the way the text goes?
6. *Sir Thopas* is designed to answer the *Prioress's Tale*, which has left the pilgrims silenced and sobered, and Chaucer the Pilgrim proves not up to the task. But of all the pilgrims that are present, who do you think would be the one to tell a tale of mirth and why?

Suggestions for Further Reading:

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Notes:

[1] We might compare this project to the circular design and construction of Rose Windows, which project a Christian worldview onto a complex web of knowledge, with all items radiating from the central stained-glass window that contained a representation (figure or symbol) of Jesus Christ.

[2] I think that this is a common problem that we have faced at some point in our lives. If you have ever gone to a medieval church, or seen images of medieval churches, you will have seen Rose Windows, which are massive pieces of sacred art that are placed high up in the wall of a church. How close could we get to the image to get a good view? Would we be able to decipher what the different images are? Are the relationships between the images clear to us? Would we have the necessary background to know?

[3] This essay, which is billed in the introduction as Pearsall's "retraction" provides both context to his earlier pronouncements on the romance genre and casts an eye towards how the problems of romance can still be thought of as adding to its enjoyment.

[4] Flanders first appears in the *Canterbury Tales* in the description of the Knight—"And he hadde been somtyme in chyvachie / In Flaundres" (GP 85-87). Flanders, here, is a place where English forces might be fighting. Whether or not Flanders' association with the Knight is a positive or negative might be considered.

[5] Chaucer's audience would make the association between Flanders and the cloth-making pursuits, and he makes it clear that is how they should be considered when he compares the Wife of Bath's abilities with those of the Flemish: "Of clooth-makyng she hadde swich an haunt / She passed hem of Ypres and of Gaunt" (GP 447-48). In addition, part of the uproar during the 1381 Peasant's Revolt was a marked distaste with Flemish merchants, which again, Chaucer references in the *Nun's Priest's Tale*: "Certes, He Jakke Straw and his meynee / Ne made nevere shoutes half so shrill / Whan that they wolden any Flemyng kille" (NPT 3394-96).